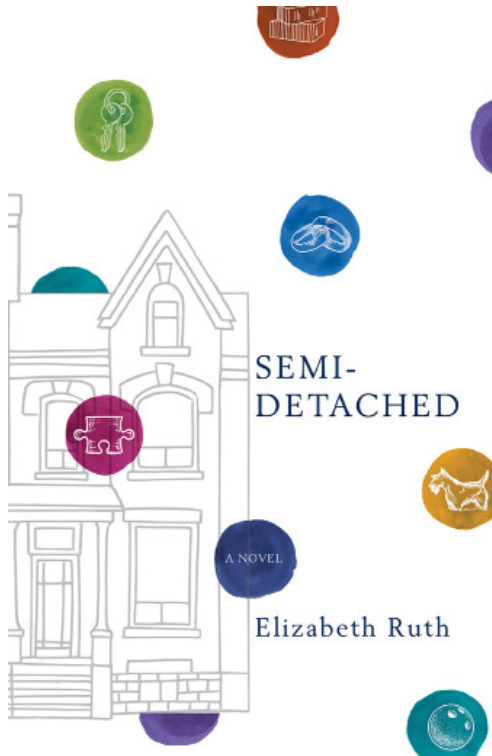


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In an ordinary city, full of extraordinary moments, a girl stands outside the Brickyard Bistro, at the intersection of Gerrard and Greenwood, cradling a puppy inside an oversized white coat. Her eyes are closed. A howling wind swirls, unwrapping her from a snowy cocoon, delivering her from one storm into another. She sucks in a wintry chill but feels no air enter her lungs. She opens her eyes. A beguiling white powder spreads out in all directions, and she scans around for anything familiar. There is nothing, no storefronts, not the curve of road nor the slant of light cutting across rooftops. Not even the air tastes as it should. Panic pushes through her ice-kissed veins. The last thing she remembers she'd been running through the whiteout. And after that? She looks to the sky, God's most reliable witness, but a foggy veil offers no comfort. She hugs the puppy closer. The wind stills, silence descends, and in that space between life and death where time collapses, and anything is possible, she steps out onto the deserted, glistening road. Before she knows it, she has crossed.

The storm was swift and brilliant, and it hardened the city to a new fate. Ice coated hydro wires and the treetops, painting a brittle glass sky. Frozen crystals glittered and crackled underfoot. Every slick surface shone a cold sterling, every home and school and office tower sparkled in the morning light.

Carlaw was a river of glass. When Laura pressed on the gas pedal, her back end skidded out, and she had to pump the brake to stop. Remarkably, her Beemer wasn't the only car on the road. A slow-moving chain had formed behind her — two grey sedans, a black SUV, and a tiny blue-and-white two-seater. Together they stuttered south. She marvelled as drops of cold, clear water fell, tears against her windshield. Was it a sign? She'd been waiting for something to drop into her life and break it open. It wasn't that she didn't love Cat. She did. But love can be a vacant house, empty for a long time before anyone notices.

At Gerrard the streetcar tracks looked treacherous. Not wanting to risk an accident, she pulled up to the restaurant across from the small dog park. It wouldn't be far on foot, at the most a ten-minute walk to the east.

She stepped cautiously and by the time she'd crossed Jones, she was making her way through a white flurry, covered in a shroud of snow. An old woman, hunched and paralyzed on one side of her body, was trying to drag her bundle buggy along the road. Empty bottles clinked and crashed. An orange tabby darted out from between two parked cars, and back again.

Rounding the corner at Condor, Laura spotted the house. A charming white wood frame with green trim, this was a home her artsy clients would covet. Located in the centre of the city, close to public transit, it was neither a cookie-cutter semi nor one of the glorified hallways people called condominiums. From outside, number two was innocuous, and gave no hint of having been va-

cant for six months. The snowy façade was reassuring, something about the way the glass in the old front windows caught the light in waves. The windows were eyes, peering out while at the same time taking her in. She made her way up the walk when she heard a voice.

“What are you doing here?”

Laura spun around. The question was so faint and far away she almost wasn't sure she'd heard it. A figure came into view. A girl bundled into a vintage coat – winter white – with an ivory velvet collar and four large gold buttons up the front. Her face was pale, alarmingly so. She had a slight frame but carried herself with confidence. *How old was she? Sixteen, seventeen maybe?* Her skin gave off a translucent sheen, as if she were bloodless or malnourished. Laura couldn't pull her gaze away.

“Well?” the girl pressed. The corners of her mouth curled upward when she spoke, not a smile exactly, an invitation.

“This place is going on the market,” said Laura. “I'm the agent.”

“Where is the woman who lives here?”

Laura shrugged, avoiding an answer. Something was sniffing the ground at her feet. A puppy. “Is that your dog?” she asked, taking a step back.

The girl bent down and lifted the Scottish terrier into her arms. “We've been out here a while.” Her tone was matter of fact, her expression neutral. Laura noted the green of her eyes and a string of star tattoos cascading down the side of her face. “Does your family know you're skipping school?”

The girl tugged an army surplus bag higher up on one shoulder and tucked the puppy into the front of her coat. “I have no family,” she said.

Laura was about to contradict her. Everyone had a family, although she knew that wasn't the case. There were overseas orphan-

ages filled with unclaimed babies, local children apprehended by social services. Her best friend, Beth, worked at a shelter and had shared story after story of kids whose families had kicked them out of the house or driven them out with years of violence. Some of them ended up working the streets. Was this girl one of them? “Do you have a name?” Laura asked.

“I changed it. You can call me Astrid.”

*Astrid.* The name was sharp, jagged. It suggested stars and swords and spears and courage, someone who could take care of herself. But could she, really?

“I’m Laura,” she said.

“Invite me in, Laura.”

She squinted to find the girl’s eyes. Maybe she was a meth addict? Lots of kids on the street used. What if Astrid mugged her? She could have thug friends waiting around the corner. “I can’t do that,” Laura said, climbing the front steps.

“You could if you wanted to.”

Laura’s chest tightened, guilt pressing down on her, a heavy wet wool blanket. The temperature hadn’t yet dropped low enough for emergency warming centres to have opened. “Can I call someone for you? A friend, maybe?”

Astrid stepped forward. “I bet the owner would let us in.”

Laura fumbled in her bag with frozen fingers, slipped her key into the lock. The owner was in a stroke-induced coma, which was why the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee had hired her to deal with the house. There was no outstanding mortgage, no will or next of kin, and the property taxes were long overdue. “Sorry I can’t be more help,” she said, pressing the front door open and ducking inside. She locked the door quickly, shutting out winter, along with the girl and the puppy.

Relieved to be safely indoors, Laura unzipped her black parka

and felt the furnace inside her chest ignite. Ten years in residential real estate and she'd not lost the sense of anticipation upon first entering a house. A front door was a threshold to a new, undiscovered world, the small and secret intimacies people wall up over a lifetime. She removed her wet boots and set them by the door. "Hello?" she called out. "Anybody here?" Nothing except the howl of wind pressing in around the door frame at her back.

Every house makes a first impression and it's not about paint colour or artwork hanging on the walls; a house has a soul, a personality. From outside, with blue-white snow as backdrop, the property had seemed tranquil, ordinary. Inside it was melancholic. One foot down and she was flooded with a palpable mix of regret and longing. She stepped into the small living room and the smell of cigarette smoke hit her. The hardwood beneath her socked feet was warped and worn to the nails. She drew the plain cotton curtains expecting to find Astrid gone, yet there she was, in the front yard, watching the house. The puppy spun circles around her legs. Just then, Astrid lifted her hand to wave and Laura waved too, before she thought to stop herself. She backed away from the window and let the curtains fall once more. Don't engage, she thought, they'll leave eventually.

The living room wallpaper was a muted blue with pink-and-white water lilies and grey cranes. A collapsible puzzle table stood in front of a faux fireplace with a peacock fan grate. Laura ran her palm along the arm of the couch and noticed a bit of cat hair. Nothing a lint roller couldn't take care of. The green slipcover matched the upholstered chair and the fringed shade on the lamp that stood behind it. Beside the chair was a magazine rack holding a dusty copy of the *Toronto Star Weekly* and a 1944 edition of the Canadian Bowling Association handbook. A pastoral oil painting hung over the fireplace and on the mantel sat a deck of

playing cards and two board games, one with the intriguing title, *The Merry Game of Fibber McGee and the Wistful Vista Mystery*. The other was a time-worn edition of *Monopoly*. An open phonograph stood against one wall. Laura moved closer and found a 78 of Frank Sinatra's "I'll Be Seeing You" on the turntable.

Wow. Someone had wanted to cling to the past! It was as if she'd stepped into a time capsule, and decades had not advanced. She pulled a pen and a small red notebook from her bag, and began jotting down details for the estate sale and to use later in preparing feature sheets for the listing:

*Dining room, standard for the time.*

*A Duncan Phyfe table. (Reproduction?)*

*Four lyre back chairs. Need reupholstering.*

*Small buffet and china cabinet.*

A wooden tea cart stood near the entrance to the kitchen. On it, a Brown Betty and two white bone china cups and saucers, their rims decorated with gold. Only one of the flared cups bore the stain of black tea marking its centre. Laura lifted it to her nose, sniffed. Earl Grey and English lavender. Her mom's favourite. Marilyn used to say a good cup of tea could fix most of life's problems. All at once Laura felt a rush of ambivalence about how she'd handled the girl with the dog. What if Astrid really needed help? She fiddled with the chain of her mom's necklace, worrying the Star of David pendant between her thumb and forefinger. When had she become so wary and mistrustful of other people? They'll be fine, she told herself. She was just overthinking it.

Wax flower arrangements coated in dust ... cobwebs and dead flies in the windowsill ... stacks of newsprint piled beneath the window ... a French copper chandelier. She wrote that down. Some

clients enjoyed a vintage touch. She'd seen one like it in the Paris hotel where she and Cat had stayed on their honeymoon. From their balcony in Montmartre, they'd had a clear view of Sacré-Cœur. How it had gleamed, a white beacon of hope under the new moon; she'd felt anything was possible back then. *Sacred Hearts*, she thought, adding to the translation. She'd expected to feel that way forever.

The kitchen was large; it held an old icebox, a full-sized refrigerator and a gleaming modern electric stove. The robin's egg blue paper that covered the wainscoting was worn and peeling and needed to be removed; the entire space would have to be painted. Laura tapped her pen on the countertop. Improvements could easily snowball: a clean paint job would make the tired cupboard doors look as though they need replacing. The countertop would stand out. At the most, she'd pay for a coat of paint and some staging. The real question was, what type of buyer would appreciate this home? She corrected herself: in many ways a house chooses its inhabitants, not the other way around. A good agent knows that.

She climbed the staircase to the second floor and for some strange reason felt she was trespassing, as if by going upstairs she was breaking an invisible seal. What if the homeowner woke from her coma to learn her home had already sold? Was it ethical to list while an owner was still alive? Her contact at the Trustee's office had told her the coma was irreversible, and funds from the sale of the house would be put toward the owner's debts. Whatever was left would go to the government. She doodled an S in her notebook and added two vertical lines, a dollar sign. Sad as it was to think about the situation, it was time to sell. If a realtor was going to be paid to represent the house, that might as well be her.

Three black-and-white photographs hung along the ascending wall — a wedding party, with the bride in a Juliet cap veil and the



groom in his World War I service dress, and an oval frame with a posed shot of a new mother holding an infant in a christening gown, the stern-looking face of the mother staring out at her, almost reproachfully. Laura stiffened. At forty, was she still young enough, healthy enough, deserving enough to be somebody's mother?

The last picture was of workers posing in overalls in front of a sign that read: Armstrong Brick Work. She scribbled in her notebook. The area stretching between Leslieville and the Pocket had a rich history that buyers might find interesting; much of it centred on brickmaking and wartime victory gardens. Given that it was winter, she'd need a good strategy for selling this place. Better not hold offers to a particular date, she thought. That way she could list at a higher price.

On the second-floor landing there hung a large black-and-white photograph of a women's five-pin bowling team, the Toronto City Majors. The back row of girls stood hip to hip with their arms slung loosely across each other's shoulders, the front row kneeling with bowling bags in front of them — bobby soxers who looked no older than twenty-five. Each girl appeared to be jubilant, triumphant. Laura lingered on their faces for signs of what, she did not know. A clue as to how to be happy? Evidence that happiness had ever been possible.

She felt a warm, buzzing sensation as her fingers met the dusty wood of the frame. She traced the outline of one girl's bright eyes with her finger. When she was not much older, her mother had been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's; they didn't know how rapidly the disease would progress and Laura hadn't yet given up her internship cataloguing artefacts at the ROM. Now, years later, her mother was gone, and *tick-tock, tick-tock*, she was still trying in vain to get pregnant. Don't be so sentimental, she

thought, withdrawing her hand.

In the bathroom, she jotted notes on the original claw-foot tub with its worn enamel. That would need to be reglazed. The white toilet and sink were stained yellow. The towels were frayed. She peeked into the small bedroom and then entered the larger master suite. On the floor, in one corner, sat two bowling ball cases, one made of tan leather and the other white with red piping. The leather was cracked with age, like an old woman's face. There were no closets. A large dresser with a dozen drawers lined one wall. On top sat a mantel clock. She ran her palm across the top of its smooth, curved surface, came away with a handful of dust. Sneezed.

She'd viewed hundreds, maybe thousands of properties before today and none of them had managed to preserve, in such detail and dust, the lives that had once been so vital there; she felt as if the owner could walk through the front door at any moment. Laura shivered at the thought, but she could hear no creaking floors, no shallow breath. She was definitely alone and yet, curiously, she didn't feel that way.

In the dresser she found folded collared shirts and pants, neckties and handkerchiefs, socks and underwear. In a small drawer sat two black ring boxes. The first was empty. Just the white satin cushion where a ring should've been. When she pried open the top of the second box, she found a rose gold wedding band. Her chest tightened. She plucked the ring out of the box and gooseflesh prickled up her arm. Holding it to the white light of the window, she squinted to make out the inscription: "Annie and Eddie. December 1944." The ring was smooth and cool to the touch. It gave off a slightly pinkish-purple hue. She clasped her hand around it and craned her neck in the direction of the hall and the bowling team. Which one of you did this belong to?

Suddenly she was tired, bone-weary, the sort of exhaustion

that comes on in a flash after exposure to the cold or a profound loss. The decrepit three-quarter spool bed looked oddly inviting. Instead, she threw herself into the tufted mustard yellow chair beside it. A glider. The arms were threadbare, the springs, useless. She rocked backwards, sank deeper into the cushion's uneasy embrace, and felt her body mould to the shape of the person who'd last sat there.